

## **Senate Floor Speech – Father Theodore Hesburgh**

*Remarks as Delivered – February 27, 2015*

Back in 1973, a young man caught a lucky break that changed his life. That young man was me, and it was my acceptance letter to the University of Notre Dame and it opened up the gates of opportunity for me. Last night, the beloved President Emeritus of Notre Dame, Father Ted Hesburgh, passed away at the age of 97. On his last day, Father Ted said Mass in the morning and passed away 12 hours later. He counseled Presidents and Popes, but he was first and foremost a priest – one who ministered to the homeless, the poor, and those in need. And that is when he was also happiest.

We were so lucky to have him touch our lives, and those of us in Indiana were fortunate enough to experience him as our friend and neighbor. Nobody who walked the streets of South Bend could forget Father Ted driving around in his little Ford Mustang, giving a wave to everybody he saw. Our country and the world is a better place because of Father Ted. He loved his God, his Country, and Notre Dame, and he ministered to anyone who asked him for help.

Father Hesburgh grew up near Syracuse, New York and he was ordained and became a priest in 1943. He promptly asked that his first assignment as a priest be as the Chaplain of a naval aircraft carrier. The leaders of the Holy Cross religious order were not surprised, they knew of Father Ted's great patriotism, his love of the United States Navy, and devotion to our service members. However, they asked him to stay at Notre Dame and minister to the families and service members who were training at that time at Vetville at Notre Dame. As always, Father Ted smiled, took the assignment, and worked nonstop. That began a journey that included the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Congressional Gold Medal, 16 presidential appointments, and 150 honorary degrees. But, more important to Father Hesburgh than all of those awards were the millions of souls he nourished, said Mass with, prayed for, and guided to a wonderful life.

When you look at Father Ted's amazing accomplishments at Notre Dame, you can't help but see what a stronger academic institution and better and more inclusive place it has become and that he left behind. Father Ted broke down the barriers and admitted women to Notre Dame back in the early 1970's. It changed the place forever and it made Notre Dame a home for everyone. My wife and daughter, both of whom graduated from the University, were direct benefits of his wisdom and his vision.

Father Hesburgh stood up to Presidents whenever necessary and stood together with Martin Luther King for civil rights. He ministered to those in poverty and to those in need every chance he could. Father Ted never gave a second thought about preaching truth to power – it helped to define who he was. We marked 50 years last July since he linked arms with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Soldier Field in Chicago, singing "We Shall Overcome" when others turned down the invitation to be there. Father Ted believed in doing what was right, not what was easy.

I will travel to Selma for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the marches there next week, and I will take Father Ted's example with me on that journey.

He expected doing what is right and not what is easy or popular from his students, as well. He had a big heart and he wanted his students to do their best – but a lack of effort was never an acceptable way of doing business with Father Ted.

As a student, I remember seeing his light on in his little dorm room with his iron cot at midnight or 2 am, and every student there knew that meant Father Ted was “open for business”. Students would stop by and seek a comforting word if a parent had just passed away, or when worried about how am I ever going to be able to pay the next tuition bill, or when they looked at their grade point and said how am I ever going to be here for other reasons next semester, or if they had personal heartbreaks. Father Ted was there for all of us to talk with. He wanted every student to know they were loved and cared about and special – just like the cooks and the gardeners and the professors and the people of Notre Dame he went up to, shook hands with, smiled at, and gave encouragement to every day.

God bless you, Father Ted. I would never be here in the United States Senate without your kindness and example – and there are Domers, as Notre Dame students are known, all over the world who know that you helped give them the chance to open doors and to be given opportunities and to have a better life that never would have happened without you.

There is a saying on the door of the Sacred Heart Basilica at the University. It says “God, Country, Notre Dame”. Father Hesburgh lived that every day.